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Belonging and Support: Women Veterans' Perceptions of Veteran Service Organizations

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Abstract

This research sought to better understand female veterans' underutilization of veteran and military service organizations (VSO/MSOs). Specifically, the Service Women's Action Network (SWAN) conducted a needs assessment examining historically low levels of social cohesion among women veterans, and then a research team analyzed data for its statistical and practical significance. The intent of this research was to provide guidance about how best to develop organizational programming around the needs of military women. Secondary analysis of 2016 SWAN needs assessment survey data involved mixed-methods analysis of open- and closed-ended questions related to VSO/MSO participation and included frequency tables, geospatial analysis, multiple logistic regression analysis with educational achievement, race/ethnicity, service branch, and service era predicting participation. Quantitative analyses were followed by content analysis of questions that provided additional insight into the participants' perceptions of VSO/MSOs. Of the sample ($n = 829$) in the present study, 31.1% of respondents were members of one or more VSO/MSOs. Current members ($n = 219$, response rate 84.9%) identified three primary organizations in which they participated, including The American Legion (32%), Disabled American Veterans (28%), and the Veterans of Foreign Wars (28%). VSO membership differed somewhat by state, with participation highest in Maryland and Wisconsin. Regression models indicated that female veterans' participation in VSOs can be correlated to higher levels of education (OR = 1.66, 95% CI [1.04, 2.66]) and Hispanic/Latino ethnicity (OR = 2.60, 95% CI [1.07, 6.33]). Statistical significance was not found for predictor variables of service branch or service era, although greater proportions of respondents were Army (30.4%) and Post-9/11 (27.6%). Qualitative analyses indicated that respondents ($n = 773$) did not feel welcome in existing service member and veteran groups (25.23%). Respondents identified this as one reason they were not currently members of these types of organizations (29.75%). Study findings offer perspective regarding women veterans' participation in and perceptions of VSO/MSOs. The findings offer important feedback for organizations hoping to reach women veterans, the fastest growing veteran population. Recommendations for increasing participation include targeted programming, single-sex offerings, available child care at some events, tailored messaging with outreach initiatives, and peer support efforts.

Keywords: military, veteran service organizations, military service organizations, VSO/MSO, veteran, veterans' health, women's health, female veterans, warrior culture, stress, resilience, programming, Service Women's Action Network, servicewomen

Background

Mary, a West Point graduate who was medically retired as a Captain after sustaining multiple injuries during combat deployments to Iraq, reported that she felt very uncomfortable when she walked into her local VFW. She said that the men in the room, all older white men, turned and stared at her. Mary is a young black woman. She never returned.

Although transitions that occur during and after military service can be challenging for men and women alike, health outcomes for military women have declined over the last fifteen years (Thomas et al., 2016). Response to changes—such as reintegrating post deployment or leaving active service or activated status—may force service members to navigate huge changes in their identity, employment, sense of purpose, and membership in a social group (Tanielan & Jaycox, 2008). As Junger (2015) and Thomas & Plummer Taylor (2015) note, any loss to one's social community may cause significant problems during transition. Collectively, challenges like financial instability, family caregiving responsibilities, and lack of social support contribute to stress injury and depression rates that are over 2.3 times higher for women veterans leaving active duty than for male veterans (Thomas, et al., 2015; Washington & Yano, 2013).

Social support inevitably emerges as a predictor of successful transition and self-reported well-being for veterans in general and female veterans in particular. It is a known contributor to health and longevity, with recent studies indicating that high levels add 7.5 years to the average American life expectancy (Egolf, Lasker, Wolf, & Potvin, 1992; Friedman, 2015). Studies have shown that there is an inverse correlation between lack of social support and increased depression symptoms, comorbid depression and anxiety, decreased scores for health measures, and increases in reported suicide attempts, specifically for female veterans (Lehavot & Simpson, 2013; Nayback-Beebe, 2010; Thomas et al., 2015). As Mary's story indicates, for women veterans, the question of where to find such social support is one fraught with challenge.

Interestingly, combat deployments themselves are not predictors of veteran mental illness; instead, important correlations are seen with timing, specifically near a recent service separation (Friedman, 2015). Veterans report significant difficulty connecting socially in the civilian community and finding a sense of meaning in their life when they become civilians (Hoge, 2010; Jakupcak, et al., 2007). Research shows that women and racial/ethnic/sexual minority veterans have higher rates of poor outcomes related to the aforementioned reintegration issues (Thomas, et al., 2015; Pelts & Albright, 2015; Wilcox, Finnery, & Cedarbaum, 2013).

Women comprise the fastest growing segment of the veteran population and approximately 15% of the total Armed Services (Murdoch et al., 2006) Yet women are still more likely to face issues of discrimination and belonging than their male counterparts (Duhart, 2012; Thomas et al., 2016). In addition, women are at a disproportionately high risk for Military Sexual Trauma (MST) and harassment (Koo & Maguen, 2014). Stigma issues and reporting barriers impact estimate certainty, but between 20-40% of female veterans report experiencing MST during their time in service (Kelly, Skelton, Patel, & Bradley, 2011). In garrison and deployed environments, issues of social support and unit cohesion are uniquely problematic for military women (Kline et al., 2013).

For these reasons, the non-profit Service Women's Action Network (SWAN) was founded in 2007 to "support, connect and advocate for service women, past, present and future" (www.servicewomen.org). Organizational aims are multi-faceted and include: to provide a community network, be an information resource, offer supportive programming, and advocate for the individual and collective needs of service women. The Service Women's Action Network (SWAN) designed and included questions about community support in its 2016 annual membership survey to determine the relationship between female veterans' participation in available veteran and military service organizations and the phenomenon of low levels of social cohesion.

Methods

Study Design

In efforts to support its organizational aims, SWAN's staff periodically conducts member and potential member needs assessments to ensure that program foci are appropriate. Data for this study

were collected during a two-month time period during the fall of 2016 as part of a larger needs assessment project aimed at illuminating unmet needs and perceived gaps in available services for military women. In particular, the 2016 SWAN needs assessment aimed to answer one primary question: “What do service women, present and past, care about?” Secondary analyses of the data were then conducted by an interdisciplinary research team beginning in January 2017. The study was submitted to the Institutional Review Board of Charleston Southern University for review. Because the analysis was secondary in nature and did not involve contact with human subjects, this study was granted exemption from the review process. The purpose of the present study was to examine the needs, interests, perceptions, and participation levels of women military veterans in veteran and military service organizations (VSOs/MSOs).

Measures

A survey instrument that focused broadly on the needs of service women was developed by one of the authors of the present study with the intent to conduct a community needs assessment that would inform SWAN’s programming in 2017. This author holds a terminal degree in social science research and is currently working as an employee of SWAN and as affiliated faculty at a local university.

For background research, SWAN looked at previous surveys of service women, including the 2016 American Legion Survey, the 2015 Veterans of Foreign Wars Survey, the 2015 Her Mission Continues Survey, and a large 2015 Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America survey that included some sex-disaggregated data. SWAN also reviewed its own 2014 community survey. Of these reviewed instruments, none sought feedback from female veterans about VSO accessibility or asked what they would like to see a VSO/MSO provide. Consequently, SWAN inserted questions in its annual membership study in an effort to understand which organizations women veterans belonged to and why they would or would not join veteran support organizations.

Procedures

After the survey was finalized, SurveyMonkey Inc. software (Palo Alto, California, USA, n.d.) was used to format the instrument for administration. The survey was then pilot tested to determine completion time and functionality. Using information from the pilot test, a format for the instrument was finalized.

For roughly two months (October 4th through November 30th, 2016), the Service Women’s Action Network (SWAN) conducted the survey of service women and women veterans. The survey link was emailed to members and posted on the organization’s website. Members were encouraged to take the survey and share it with their networks of service women. It was broadly distributed through a social media campaign that reached service women across the country. Agencies sharing the link to the survey on social media platforms and websites included SWAN, the U.S. Department of Veterans’ Affairs (VA) Center for Women Veterans, and American Women Veterans. In an effort to increase the response rate, one reminder e-mail was sent seven days after the initial solicitation to SWAN members. Responses were confidential, and data were collected and reported in aggregate via SurveyMonkey Inc. software.

Analysis

Secondary analysis of survey data involved mixed-methods analysis of open and closed-ended questions related to VSO/MSO participation by respondents who identified as female veterans ($n = 829$).

Quantitative Analysis

In order to explore the results of several questions related to female veteran membership in a veteran service organization (VSO), one-way frequency tables and contingency tables—sometimes referred to as two-way frequency tables—were generated, as these analytic approaches are most appropriate when categorical data are collected from a cross-sectional survey (Triola & Triola, 2006). Specifically, one-way frequency tables were generated for the following questions: (1) Are you a SWAN member? (2) Are you a VSO member? (3) Are there any reasons you wouldn't join an existing VSO? A choropleth map with graduated symbols was created in QGIS to illustrate VSO membership among female veterans by state (Quantum GIS Development Team, 2015). Contingency tables were generated in order to determine if membership in a VSO varied by educational achievement (highest education achieved), race/ethnicity, service branch, and service era.

Further, associations between VSO membership among female veterans and educational achievement, race/ethnicity, service branch, and service era were tested for statistical significance via maximum likelihood (ML) binomial logistic regression analysis (Pearl & Reed, 1920; Pearl, Reed, & Kish, 1940; Schumacker, 2014). Odds ratios, which provide an estimation of association between categorical/binary variables in logistic regression analysis, were assessed for statistical significance with 95 percent confidence intervals (Szumilas, 2010). The chi-square test, χ^2 , was used to assess omnibus model significance (Hosmer, Taber, & Lemeshow, 1991). The Nagelkerke R^2 was utilized in order to determine the total variance explained by each model (Nagelkerke, 1991). Multicollinearity was assessed according to Neter, Wasserman, and Kutner's (1990) procedure. Results of this analysis showed that all Variance Inflation Factors (VIFs) were below 10; therefore, the assumptions for binomial logistic regression were met.

Qualitative Analysis

Open-ended analysis of questions provided additional insight into the participants' responses. Four questions were included: (1) What should an organization dedicated to serving the needs of military women spend time doing? (2) What would best help create a sense of community among your fellow service women and women veterans? (3) Are you a VSO member? If so, which one(s)? (4) Are there any reasons you would not join an existing VSO?

Qualitative answers were coded independently by two researchers following accepted standards (Krueger & Casey, 2000). An inductive content analysis approach identified prominent themes and ideas across the respondents' open-ended answers. When compared to other qualitative strategies (e.g., grounded theory; Creswell, 2013), content analysis entails a "subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of identifying themes of patterns" (Hsiu-Fang & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278).

Researchers identified commonalities that emerged from initial analysis of the identified questions, and coders conferred to gain consensus about emergent themes. Greater weight was given to concepts that were mentioned by multiple respondents; for subthemes to be considered salient, they must have been mentioned in at least 50 different surveys. Researchers focused on the top four themes for each question, as the data indicated a preponderance of focus on those top tiers/themes. Qualitative analysis is rarely a linear process, but the use of multiple coders for consensus and systematic charting of themes provided order and quantification to the analysis of open-ended questions' data.

Results

Quantitative Results

In total, 1,293 people completed the survey. Only the female veteran sub-sample was used in the present analysis ($n = 829$). Some variation in VSO membership was evident geographically. (See

Figure 1.) Specifically, Maryland and Wisconsin exhibited the highest VSO participation rates. Regarding membership in a VSO, 31.10 percent of the study sample answered in the affirmative

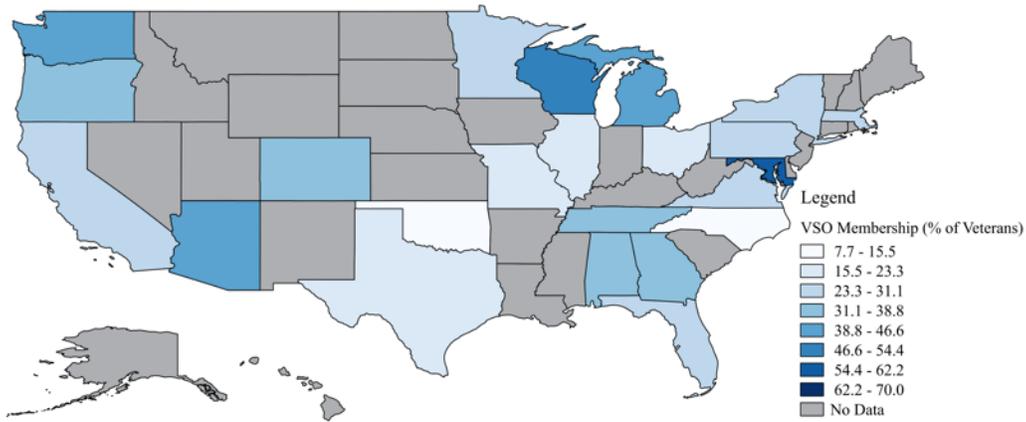


Figure 1. Female veteran VSO membership by state. States with fewer than 10 participants were suppressed in the map due to unstable estimates.

A contingency table for women veteran educational achievement and VSO membership is shown in Table 1. Results of the logistic regression analysis for the association between educational achievement and VSO membership showed that the omnibus model was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(4) = 7.18, p = 0.13, \text{Nagelkerke } R^2 = 0.02$. However, female veterans with an associate’s degree were more likely than female veterans with only a high school education to be a VSO member, $OR = 1.66, 95\% \text{ CI } [1.04, 2.66]$. The greatest proportion of VSO members had graduate degrees. In fact, the probability of randomly selecting one female veteran with a graduate degree, given that she was a VSO member, was 0.34.

Table 1

Relationship between female veteran educational achievement and membership in a veteran service organization

	Member	Non-member	OR
	N (%)	N (%)	
High school degree ^a	2 (0.30)	12 (1.90)	Ref ^b
Some college	38 (6.00)	115 (18.10)	3.29
Associate degree	29 (4.60)	62 (9.80)	1.66 *
Bachelor degree	62 (9.80)	123 (19.40)	1.17
Graduate degree	68 (10.70)	124 (19.50)	1.09

Note. OR = Odds Ratio.

^a The high school category includes those who did or did not complete high school.

^b The high school group served as the reference category for comparisons.

* Statistically significant based on a 95% confidence interval

A contingency table displaying female veteran race/ethnicity by VSO membership is shown in Table 2 below. The sample was fairly racially homogeneous—that is, 55 percent of the total study sample self-reported their race/ethnicity as White. For this reason, the White respondent group was used as a reference category in the regression analysis, with subgroups more or less likely than the White majority to report membership in veteran groups. Results of the binomial logistic regression analysis for the relationship between race/ethnicity and VSO membership showed that the model was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(6) = 8.84, p = 0.18, \text{Nagelkerke } R^2 = 0.02$. However, Hispanic/Latino

female veterans were more likely than White female veterans to be a VSO member, OR = 2.60, 95% CI [1.07, 6.33]. This difference was practically and statistically significant, as Hispanic/Latino veteran women were 2.6 times more likely than White peers to report VSO participation.

Table 2

Relationship between female veteran race/ethnicity and membership in a veteran service organization

	Member	Non-member	OR
	N (%)	N (%)	
White	146 (23.20)	318 (50.60)	Ref ^a
American Indian/AmNative	2 (0.30)	5 (0.80)	1.15
Asian/PacificIslander	1 (0.20)	5 (0.80)	2.30
Black/AfAm	17 (2.70)	40 (6.40)	1.08
Hispanic/Latino	6 (1.00)	34 (5.40)	2.60 *
Other	15 (2.40)	19 (3.00)	0.58
Multiracial	7 (1.10)	14 (2.20)	0.92

Note. OR = Odds Ratio; AI/AN = American Indian/Alaskan Native;

PI = Pacific Islander; AM = African American; H/L = Hispanic/Latino

^a The White race/ethnicity category served as the reference category for all comparisons

* Statistically significant based on a 95% confidence interval

Table 3 displays a contingency table for the cross-tabulation of VSO membership by service branch. Results of the logistic regression analysis showed that there were no differences, statistically, between the various service branches with respect to VSO membership, $\chi^2(4) = 4.07$, $p = 0.40$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.01$. However, among VSO members, female veterans who served in the Army represented the largest proportion, followed by the Navy and the Air Force. In fact, the probability of randomly selecting one female veteran from the study sample who served in the Army, given that she was a VSO member, was 0.50.

Lastly, a contingency table for VSO membership and female veteran service era is shown in Table 4 below. Results of the binomial logistic regression analysis showed that there were no statistical differences between the various service eras with respect to VSO membership, $\chi^2(3) = 2.84$, $p = 0.42$, Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.01$. Descriptive results showed that the greatest proportion of VSO members were Post-9/11 era veterans, followed by the Persian Gulf War era veterans, Cold War era veterans, and World War II (WWII)/Vietnam War era veterans. The probability of randomly selecting one Post-9/11 era female veteran from the study sample, given that she was a VSO member, was 0.47.

Table 3

Relationship between female veteran service branch and membership in a veteran service organization

	Member	Non-member	OR
	N (%)	N (%)	
Air Force	33 (5.20)	100 (15.60)	Ref ^a
Army	99 (15.50)	194 (30.40)	0.65
Coast Guard	5 (0.80)	13 (2.00)	0.86
Marines	20 (3.10)	37 (5.80)	0.61
Navy	42 (6.60)	96 (15.00)	0.75

Note. OR = Odds Ratio

^a Ref = The Air Force group served as the reference category for all pairwise comparisons.

* Statistically significant based on a 95% confidence interval

Table 4

Relationship between female veteran service era and membership in a veteran service organization

	Member	Non-member	OR
	N (%)	N (%)	
WWII/Vietnam War	21 (3.30)	51 (8.10)	Ref ^a
Cold War	36 (5.70)	86 (13.70)	0.98
Persian Gulf War	47 (7.50)	122 (19.40)	1.07
Post 9/11	93 (14.80)	174 (27.60)	0.77

Note. OR = Odds Ratio; WWII = World War II

^a Ref = The WWII/Vietnam War era group served as the reference category for all comparisons.

* Statistically significant based on a 95% confidence interval

Qualitative Results

Each question had a different sample size since veteran respondents ($n = 829$) elected to provide open-ended responses or abstain from doing so. Relevant to analyses of qualitative results is the percentage of survey respondents who reported being current SWAN members. Only 9.3% of respondents were members, indicating broader reach and generalizability of the response data. Participants were asked if they believed an organization dedicated to serving the needs of military women should exist. Most respondents ($n = 778$, response rate of 93.85%) answered “yes” to the dichotomous question (97% of respondents) and were offered the option to expand on that answer in an open-ended question: What should an organization like that spend time doing? Overwhelmingly, respondents ($n = 778$) affirmed that they preferred for the organization to spend time on advocacy on behalf of service women and women veterans (53.82%), community-building efforts (18.37%), resource provision specific to women veterans (17.46%), and resource provision specific to active-duty women (10.35%).

Coders analyzed responses ($n = 773$, response rate of 93.24%) to an open-ended question: (2) What would best help create a sense of community among your fellow service women and women veterans? The top responses included feeling welcome in existing service member and veteran groups (25.23%), attending conferences and seminars for service women and women veterans (19.66%), participating in mentorship as either mentor/mentee (13.07%), and connecting professionally (9.57%).

Participants were asked if they were a member of a VSO/MSO, and 778 responded (response rate of 93.24%). Most respondents (71.54%) answered “no” to the dichotomous question; those who affirmed that they were current members (28.46%) were offered the option to expand on that answer in an open-ended question: (3) If so, which one(s)? Those who answered the open-ended question ($n = 219$, response rate of 99.55%) identified three primary organizations in which they participated, including The American Legion (32%), Disabled American Veterans (28%), and the Veterans of Foreign Wars (28%).

Table 5

Top 3 veteran organizations for service women

VSO	Number	Percent
American Legion	69	32%
Disabled American Veterans	62	28%
Veterans of Foreign Wars	62	28%

Note. VSO = Veterans Service Organization.

Coders analyzed responses ($n = 773$, response rate of 93.24%) to a fourth open-ended question: (4) Are there any reasons you would not join an existing VSO? Coders found emergent themes, with top responses including: no reason not to join (40.23%), does not feel like a welcoming community (29.75%), I don't live near a chapter (15.27%), and the mission or issues focus is not relevant to me (14.75%).

Discussion and Conclusion

Social support is often negatively impacted by military service (Tanielan & Jaycox, 2008). Many military service members are subjected to repeat deployments, which can result in compromised intimate relationships with spouses and children, gender shifts in role responsibilities, financial concerns, and diminishing community support (Cox & Albright, 2014).

Veteran Service Organizations can play an important role in rebuilding eroded support levels and creating a social bridge for transitioning veterans (Hoge, 2010; Thomas, 2016). Unfortunately, results of the present study indicate that current organizations don't reach women veterans with ideal effect. Quantitative analyses indicated that participation rates are low, and qualitative analyses indicated that women veterans do not report impressions of a welcoming environment. Further qualitative research could provide more insight into low participation rates and the reasons for negative perceptions of VSO/MSO environments reported by military veteran women in the present study.

Limitations

When considering the findings of this report, a number of limitations must be acknowledged, including its overall exploratory nature. Data were self-reported, which could be problematic due to respondent recall or reluctance to answer sensitive, personal questions honestly. However, the use of self-report in survey-based research in the field is both accepted and common (Alvarez, Canduela, & Raeside, 2012). Because of the non-random sample, results are limited in generalizability; further assessments should seek larger sample sizes. Another limitation was the cross-sectional nature of this study's design, providing information from one snapshot in time from survey respondents.

Conclusion

The results of the present study indicate that participation in VSOs by female veterans is predicted by higher levels of education and Hispanic ethnicity. In the present study, most members served in the Army and were of the Post-9/11 era. With the exception of the education variable, although statistical significance is present, practical significance (effect on the individual) is minimal. Education does practically and significantly predict participation in a VSO/MSO, but quantitative analysis of the study data indicates that it is challenging to predict what types of female veterans join veteran service organizations. Simple consideration of predictor variables in this study (race/ethnicity, branch of service, or service era) does not offer practical predictive ability.

Kate is a woman veteran who volunteered for a VSO. Over the years, Kate heard from other women veterans about why they did not utilize veterans' services or participate in VSOs. Many organizations' planned events failed to include child care. Other veterans felt unwelcome. Events often felt like unfriendly spaces for women. Stories like these, and worse, are common experiences among the growing community of women veterans. They often say that they feel unwelcome in the very places that were created to support veterans. Today, Kate spends her volunteer time trying to change this.

Unfortunately, both Kate's case and the results of the present study indicate that many female veterans do not feel comfortable participating in existing organizations. This is not news to the organizations that report struggling to recruit women veteran members; the numbers and rosters all indicate that women veterans are not currently seeking involvement and the resulting social support benefits to the same degree as their male colleagues (Coon, 2016; Thomas, 2016; Wessel, 2016). When asked what VSO activities they care about, women veterans mention advocacy and community-building efforts, but respondents indicated that they often feel unwelcome at VSO events and see the mission and focus of existing organizations as out of alignment with their own.

The findings of the present study present important feedback for VSOs hoping to reach women veterans, the fastest-growing veteran population (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2012). First, it is important to note that many women do not feel like current efforts are effective. Understanding the service challenges many of these veterans likely faced while on active duty can and should inform programming. Culturally competent programming could include trauma-informed offerings in a single-sex environment. This type of programming could lead to larger group participation. Gender norms in military family life must also be considered in the type of programming that VSOs offer. Women are more likely to be the primary caregivers to dependent children (Mankowski, & Everett, 2016), and unavailability of child care could be a barrier to participation (Thomas, et al., 2016). Sociocultural barriers are nuanced leadership challenges that require diverse input from stakeholders at all levels of organizations or event-planning teams; making events friendly spaces for women veterans is possible and should be done (Held & Owens, 2013; Thomas, 2016). Programming should consider gender-based norms and recognize that barriers to women veterans' participation in VSOs exist. Simply noticing that 71.43% of female veteran respondents are not current members of an organization is just the beginning; outreach must be thoughtful, peer-led, and considerate of the culture of women warriors (Thomas, Plummer Taylor, Hamner, Glazer, & Kaufman, 2015).

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